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Beyond Nussbaum's Ethics of Reading: Camus, Arendt and the Political Significance of Narrative Imagination

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Abstract

The article contributes to current theoretical debates about the political significance of narrative imagination by drawing on Albert Camus's and Hannah Arendt's existentially-grounded aesthetic judging sensibility. It seeks to displace the prevalent tendency to probe literature for its moral-philosophical insights, and instead delves into the experiential reality of our engagement with literary works. It starts from Martha Nussbaum's recognition of the literary ability to account for the fragility of human affairs, yet finds her reduction of narrative imagination to the role of furthering moral lessons wanting politically. Against this background, the article reclaims Camus's and Arendt's dialogical-representative judging orientation and its insight into the narrative ability to respond to the intersubjective character of political action. As such, their aesthetic sensibility reveals the potential political significance of literary imagination in its capacity to open a public space where the contradictions of our situated existence can be confronted through politics between plural equals.

Keywords: ethics of narrative, aesthetic judgement, Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Martha Nussbaum, worldly recognition

Camus, Arendt and the Political Significance of Narrative Imagination

Introduction

Of late, thinkers from diverse theoretical perspectives have explored the ethical and political value of narrative voice, awarding literary imagination a significant role in practical judgement. Within this turn, as articulated in its prominent contemporary proponent Martha Nussbaum, literary imagination is praised for its ability to displace our understanding of judgement as an abstract exercise in the application of universal standards. Narrative-inspired judgement, instead, is conceived as a reflective activity of recognizing others and events in their particular situational complexity, and of stimulating our capacity of an adequate response. As such, narrative imagination is well-suited to confront the "fragility of goodness" in a world of politics, as a realm of human communal, context-specific choices and actions that is characterized by plurality and unpredictability and that therefore eludes the grasp of pre-fabricated moral rules.[1] Nevertheless, this exploration of the ethical value of narrative retains a theoretical, rationalist penchant. Even though Nussbaum sets to examine the lived reality of our engagement with literary works, the emphasis lies primarily on probing literature for its moral-philosophical insights,[2] rather than its political potential. Conceiving of the ethics of reading as an activity of self-cultivation, Nussbaum's account confines literary imagination to the role of furthering moral lessons, while falling short of adequately exploring how narrative might help us face the vagaries of political affairs.

Against this background, this article aims to reclaim an alternative perspective on the political import of narrative voice: the historically-attuned, existential orientation of Hannah Arendt and Albert Camus. In rebellion against traditional philosophy's taste for abstract

reasoning, the two thinkers share an existential commitment to bringing political thinking back to the realm of human lived experience. Their attempts to rethink political judgement along the lines of aesthetic sensibility were shaped by an awareness of the loss of metaphysical guarantees in modernity. This recognition led them to a deep appreciation of the perplexities of political affairs, theorizing them as stemming from the ambiguity of our human condition as both free and situated beings. Yet, their aesthetic sensibility is distinguished for its specifically worldly, political focus. In contrast to the lingering vestiges of subjectivism they perceived in the tradition of existentialist philosophy, Camus and Arendt confronted the ambiguity of political affairs through a distinct dialogic, representative judging orientation. Their dialogical focus foregrounds the political relevance of narrative at the fundamental existential level. Narrative is not understood as a conveyor of any specific truth content or way of reasoning, but intimates a mode of understanding aimed at making sense of human worldly experience.[3] This underlying existential import of narrative echoes the recent calls for a sustained exploration of the features of narrative and the process of narrative interaction that underpin its political relevance.[4] Camus's and Arendt's contribution rests in retaining attention on the situated character of aesthetic judgement, envisioning narrative sensibility as an activity of negotiating the plurality of perspectives and disclosing a shared world as an intersubjective space for the appearance of political action. On this basis, the article suggests how our engagement with literary works can strengthen our capacity of political action, understood as a specifically human ability of assuming responsibility for and freely responding to the intricacies of our world – rather than fleeing them in dreams of moral purity.

The argument proceeds as follows. The first section reconstructs the main concerns guiding Nussbaum's ethics of narrative, while exposing its limitations. The second section engages the perspectives of Arendt and Camus. Contrary to Nussbaum's philosophical focus, it reveals how their aesthetic sensibility places narrative in the service of confronting the ambiguity of

political action and answering to the pressing need for intersubjective recognition that follows from the weakened validity of traditional verities. The third section undertakes an exploration of our lived engagement with literary works, contrasting Nussbaum's ethics of reading with Camus's and Arendt's aesthetic reimaginings of political judgement. Narrative ethics as self-cultivation is guided by the moral concern with ensuring a proper way of grasping others' experience (of suffering and injustice), while abstracting from the plurality of the world. The existential thinkers' aesthetic imagination, in contrast, can foster worldly forms of recognition and thus constantly disclose the possibilities and limitations of political action inhering in our situated political coexistence.

Nussbaum and Ethics of Narrative as Self-cultivation

First articulated in her 1983 essay on Henry James's *Golden Bowl,* Nussbaum's ethics of reading rests on a rejection of the predominant tendency within (Anglo-American) political theory to separate the realms of moral philosophy and literature, and relegate the latter to a marginal role within the sphere of ethics.[5] Literary form, Nussbaum argues, "is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and statement of truth." This acknowledgement leads the author to consider the narrative attentiveness to the world's "complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty" as an essential part of ethical reflection.[6] The challenge to the divide between the realms of philosophy and literature implies a reconsideration of the judging activity and ethics as such. The ability to judge is no longer understood primarily as knowledge of universal rules and their application onto particular cases. Narrative sensibility foregrounds judgement as a reflective ability of just perception and responsiveness to the concrete situation at hand.[7]

Nussbaum's narrative ethics attempts to provide a corrective to "the abstractness of the Enlightenment thinking," in particular to Kantian and Utilitarian perspectives, which reduce moral reasoning to detached philosophical speculation, while abstracting from the experiential character of human life.[8] Invoking Aristotelian sources, she links narrative inquiry to the question of how human beings should live, to accounting for emotive, practical dimensions of ethical and political choices and actions as they are lived by finite and imperfect beings such as ourselves.[9] Nussbaum's literary sensibility comes to embody a quest for a humanist ethics better attuned to world's plurality and contingency, "uncontrolled events" and "tragic reversals" that importantly shape our potentials to live a good life.[10] Narrative imagination can do this because it breaks with the Enlightenment philosophy's emphasis on the autonomous self that is able to know and master the whole of reality. Our humanity, instead, consists in a constant cultivation of attentiveness to the complexity of life that precisely cannot be dissolved into the subject's pre-fabricated thought-frame.[11] Accordingly, Nussbaum seeks to unearth "not the morality that is *caused* by reading," but "the morality of the *act* of reading."[12] The purpose is to delve into the lived experience of reading as a "communal endeavour" by which we are "constituted" as a community of responsible spectators of political events and incited to reflect upon feasible forms of "living together."[13]

Commending the role of literary imagination in the public sphere, Nussbaum places at the forefront its ability to further recognition across difference, such as that of class, race, nation or gender, characterizing the pluralism of contemporary life. Literary imagination improves our capacity of judgement because it guards against "refusals to see," those lapses of attention where we view others as abstract entities or mere means to greater ends.[14] It teaches us to see others as human beings that are both different from us and bound to us by our "common vulnerability," "similar weaknesses and needs, as well as similar capacities for achievement."[15] In this way, it is possible to give voice to silenced members of society and denounce the

injustices committed against them, yet bear in mind that they are not passive objects of our benevolent gaze. At the same time, this position makes us less prone to treat different others as wholly alien or evil, but recognize them as rightful participants in deliberation about common goals.[16]

This appeal of literature, however, is envisioned to proceed by way of stimulating our "knowledge of possibilities."[17] Drawing on Aristotle, Nussbaum believes literature intimates the process of judging because it introduces us to a plethora of events "that might happen," reveals "their impact on human lives" and allows us to evaluate in general terms the "possibilities for being human."[18] This is because the reader can imagine what it would feel like to be struck by the same misfortunes as those plaguing the literary characters, but is sufficiently distanced to be capable of critical judgement.[19] An engagement with literature then occurs in the controlled solitary space of the reader's inner self. Literature, as Vasterling notes, assumes the role of an "ethics lab," where we can train our capacities of adequate response without the intrusion of contingency that confronts us in the outer world.[20] The experience of reading is seen primarily as an act of self-cultivation or a fostering of one's character. Texts are engaged as carriers of moral "paradigms," which the readers are supposed to extrapolate and apply to their own situations.[21]

The troubling political implications of this self-centred penchant are visible in the way Nussbaum envisions our engagement with literature to lead to the desired goal of recognizing others as our equals in their very particularity. The process of responding to others' perspectives proceeds by virtue of a constant interplay "between the general and the concrete," between general human needs, and the ways these are furthered or impeded by particular social and political arrangements.[22] Yet, the crux of desired recognition remains directed on the inner self, a margin of interiority that is transcendent to its worldly existence and its interaction with others.[23] What is presupposed is "a generalizable moral consciousness,"[24] which is applied as

a standard of judgement between different historical arrangements. In this respect, ethics of narrative as self-cultivation lingers within a monological perspective, recognizing only "what fits our [already established] frame of reference," to the exclusion of other perspectives.[25] Nussbaum's account presupposes a shared conception of humanity that must first be brought into existence through a consideration of a plurality of equally valuable "imagining and thinking and feeling" acts of the different members of the reading community.[26]

This important limitation of Nussbaum's narrative ethics can be attributed to its exploration of the purpose of literature within the framework of a philosophical inquiry into the ways of a good life. Despite its emphasis on the "mystery, conflict, and riskiness of the lived deliberative situation," literary engagement is placed primarily in the role of developing the arguments of moral philosophy and stirring in the audience "a recognition of ethical truths."[27] This focus disregards the important difference between the inner world of philosophical inquiry and the outer world of politics. Nussbaum's literary judgement thus retains the (philosophical) temptation towards managing the plurality and complexity of life in line with a preconceived vision of moral order, while passing over the otherwise aptly recognized tragedies of political action.[28]

Camus, Arendt and the World-disclosing Potentials of Narrative

A fruitful alternative to the lingering philosophical penchant of Nussbaum's model, Camus's and Arendt's existentially-grounded aesthetic perspectives are explicitly oriented to accounting for the ambiguity of political judgement and action after the modern loss of eternal standards. Their aesthetic sensibility has often been chided for harbouring individualist, even aestheticist tendencies that are hardly adequate to answer the pressing concerns of politics in

contemporary world. In contrast, this section argues that their dialogic, representative judging orientation is distinct for its ability to confront the intersubjective, worldly character of political action. It traces their respective engagements with what they perceived to be the dangers of subjectivism and excess present in attempts to conceive of political judgement on the model of aesthetic practice. It reveals the political significance of Camus's dialogic conception of creativity in its refusal of final answers, to retain attention to disclosing the limits of the world and of different others. It then delves into Arendt's articulation of the specifically political function of narrative imagination in its ability to cultivate the worldly space for political action.[29]

Camus's and Arendt's aesthetic sensibility arose in response to a series of twentieth-century events, whose terrifying novelty reached its peak in the advent of totalitarian crimes. This upsurge of "what should not have happened," for them, irreversibly destroyed the established moral standards of the Western philosophical tradition and ensued in a profound crisis of political judgement and action in modernity.[30] The modern loss of eternal standards was not an abstract philosophical problem, but revealed a more fundamental predicament of human existence, touching upon our very ability to understand experience and engage in meaningful political action. As conveyed in Camus's insights into the absurd condition of human existence, individuals have found themselves situated in an incomprehensible world "divested of illusions and lights," of those absolute values that used to provide reasons for judging and acting.[31] In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus explicates this condition as a "confrontation" between the human need for understanding and "the unreasonable silence of the world" – which also binds the two together into an indissoluble unity.[32] The absurd sensibility thereby illuminates the historical, worldly condition of human existence and the ensuing ambiguity of political judgement. Human beings are not pure *cogitos,* but are deeply immersed in the world as an inescapable horizon of experience and so cannot reach a completely transparent view of the given situation.

This awareness of the limits of human reason contains the existential-phenomenological challenge to the tradition of political theory, dispensing with its quest for metaphysical absolutes and eternal standards of morality as but futile attempts to "transcend" and "refine" this life, only to ultimately "betray it."[33] What is required, Camus argues, is a thorough rethinking of political judgement as an aesthetic practice, whose rebellion against the absurd is affirmed in free creation. [34] The distinctive mark of such aesthetic judgement is that it does not aim to subsume the phenomenal character of the world under pre-fabricated standards, but affirms its independent existence and revels in finding meaning in its untameable particularity and plurality.[35] This appeal is explicitly formulated in Arendt's attempt to reconsider political judgement on the model of Kant's account of aesthetic judgements of taste. Aesthetic judgement, as she notes, corresponds to the ability of reflective judgement, where "only the particular is given for which the general has to be found."[36] It can assume the ambiguous condition of political judgement by engaging every occurrence "in full spontaneity," without reliance on preconceived standards of thought.[37]

These insights into aesthetic judgement as a worldly activity bring to light the utmost political import of narrative attentiveness to the particularity of human experience. For Arendt, the traditional conception of judgement as application of prefabricated standards was politically troubling because it ended up demoting political action to instrumental realization of a pre-given standard. What philosophers fled from and denied, however, was the distinctly *human* capacity of action. Within Arendt's oeuvre, politics as a realm of action is experientially distinct from both work and labour, two other activities that compose the *vita activa* or human (active) being in the world. Political action involves the manifestation of human plurality, consisting of individuals engaging their freedom in the world and beginning anew in the company of their peers. If labour is driven by the necessity of the life process and work is determined by its end product, it is action with others that reveals our distinct humanity, the

"who" rather than the "what" of the actors' identity, which cannot be grasped with abstract categories of thought.[38] Grounded in human freedom, it is in the essence of action to interrupt any natural or historical chain of causes and effects, and bring into the world something new that could not have been known or predicted. Appearing in the midst of the intersubjective world, further, its outcomes are bound to remain unpredictable and uncontrollable.[39]

Aesthetic attentiveness to "the particular qua particular" can support the human capacity of political action because it is free to salvage particular events from their predetermined place in a larger whole.[40] It can thus disclose the "who," "the revelatory character" of action, and so affirm the political sphere as a space of freedom, and not a plaything of larger metaphysical or historical forces.[41] Or, to state it differently, narrative loyalty to the structure of human action answers to the human need to understand experience. As embodied, worldly beings, our sense of selves as free beings depends crucially on our capacity of making sense of events, developing a sense of the shared or common world as an intersubjective, public space where our actions can be seen by others and gain "a humanly comprehensible meaning."[42] Narrative-inspired judgement, then, can affirm the human significance of politics because it illuminates past occurrences as a living reality in our common world, enriches our sense of the real and helps address the intricacies of the present moment.[43] It fosters the process of what Arendt calls "reconciliation" with ever-changing worldly reality, which simultaneously evokes the potentials of human action in the present and the future.[44]

The existential insights into the political relevance of stories reveal a deeper appreciation of the importance of intersubjective recognition than that present in Nussbaum's ethics of narrative. With the modern shattering of the coherent whole of Being where each action was assigned a pre-determined place, the issue of one's humanity turns into an open, existential question. As Arendt underscores, human freedom lacks the self-evidence of a natural fact, and exists only "as a political and as a human reality."[45] Human dignity and the status of a political

actor refers to the process of "becoming" human and to the ability of *exercising* one's rights, which is predicated on the dynamics of receiving and bestowing recognition within the political realm. Conversely, the status of a political actor can be denied through failures of recognition or practices of misrecognition. Narrative imagination thereby brings out the situated, and deeply political, nature of the activity of judging, of affirming bonds of solidarity and resisting injustice.[46] The awareness that individuals' humanity is situationally and intersubjectively produced, however, also points to the difficulty involved in recognizing others as equals in their difference. The acknowledgement of individuals' political status requires the recognition of their autonomy as agents, yet an autonomy that constantly engages the outside world and other freedoms.[47]

Camus confronted this ambiguity in his insistence on the "free essence" of creative judgement, which arises only from "the constraints it imposes on itself," and dies of external rules.[48] Camus is responding to what he perceived as the dangers of "engaged" or "edifying" literature, prominent in the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus's charge to Sartre is underlain by his insights into the modern problem of metaphysical rebellion. Rejecting the injustice of the human condition, the rebels ended in an unlimited affirmation of human powers to mould the whole universe according to their will – a pretension that gains concreteness in the excesses of twentieth-century revolutionary movements.**[49]** In Sartre's desire to respond to the ambiguities of a historical situation with a synthesizing vision, Camus discerned just such an attempt at solitary mastery that reduces human freedom to realization of pre-conceived ideas of justice, while obscuring the plurality of the world.[50] Among the left-wing intellectuals of Sartre's camp, Camus's appreciation of the irremediably tragic character of human existence was deplored as an abstention from concrete historical struggles for greater justice.[51] For Camus, however, the ambiguity of worldly freedom meant that we should limit our aspirations to the pursuit of relative values, formed through a consideration of a plurality of other

perspectives.[52] The aesthetic attentiveness to the limits of human reason here translates into an affirmation of human solidarity. Rather than aiming for final answers, Camus's creative judgement is grounded upon an imaginative ability to describe others "faithfully" and "with consideration," to always strive to see them as concrete, embodied freedoms.[53] The affirmed solidarity is not based on an abstract idea or cause that would seek to press others into agreement and ultimately reconcile the different perspectives. It thrives at the "limits where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist."[54] By a careful attentiveness to the irreducible particularity and plurality of the world, Camus's artistic judgement aimed to reveal the individual experiences of suffering, joy and exile as situations shared by all.[55] On this basis, it strove to bring to light common humanity precisely by embracing the differences that compose it and open a platform for dialogue where opposing political groups could "confront one another without clashing."[56]

Arendt builds on the political relevance of this dialogical aesthetic sensibility in her reflections on the specifically worldly function of art. The political relevance of stories lies in their ability to inspire an attitude of "loving care" for the plurality of the appearing world.[57] As she writes, aesthetic sensibility intimates the process of judging politically because it concerns "not knowledge or truth," but "the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world."[58] It is a highly dangerous error, however, to introduce into politics the fabricating attitude that brought art works into being and place stories in the service of a refinement of one's character.[59] Disregarding the important difference between works of art and real life, this tendency succumbs to the belief that it might be possible to "make" politics in accordance with a preconceived (aesthetic) ideal.[60] As Arendt elaborates in her reflection on the troubling political implications of Heidegger's philosophy, this aestheticist reversal occurs when thought refuses wonder to the plurality of the world and turns inward towards itself. Rather than affirming the independent existence of the outside world, it mistakenly assumes

that the whole of reality can be rendered a function of an inward-oriented cultivation of a unique, isolated Self.[61] Not only does it further the view of engagement with literature as a venue through which to escape the threat of political reality, to view the world "through a veil of sweetness and light."[62] Removed from the common world, it also threatens to conceive of different others as material to be moulded at will.[63]

Against this danger, Arendt upheld the political promise of stories through her appropriation of Kant's aesthetic judgement as corresponding to the ability of "enlarged mentality" or "representative thinking."[64] Representative thinking can face up to the ambiguity of politics because, in the reflective process of moving from the particular to the general, it does not aim for a solitary position above the realm of human affairs. It proceeds by entertaining a plurality of different perspectives on the world. For this aesthetic taste relies crucially on the faculty of imagination, which allows it to distance itself from subjective conditions that shape its particular perspective, and represent in its mind what reality looks like from other people's viewpoints.[65] Importantly, representative thinking is not a matter of trying "to be or to feel like somebody else." The aim is not to reach the innermost kernel of another's subjectivity, but an understanding that comes from looking upon "the same world from one another's standpoint."[66] By constantly articulating a plurality of perspectives on the world, representative thinking is capable of cultivating what Arendt, following Kant, calls *sensus communis.* By this she means a "specifically human sense" of what we share in common that enables us to orient ourselves in the public realm.[67] For Arendt, then, the plurality of political affairs is not something to be overcome, but the very condition of bringing into existence a shared, public world.[68] Rendering things into a matter of discourse between a plurality of different perspectives, representative judgement brings into existence a space, where the particular occurrences can appear in their worldly, intersubjective meaning.[69] Representative aesthetic judgement thus answers to the difficulties of intersubjective recognition by revealing humans

in the way they appear on the temporal and spatial plane of the common world, in how their identities both change and remain the same through their interactions in the political realm. This emphasis is crucial because it foregrounds judgement's ability to recognize humans as acting beings, rather than passive instantiations of inhuman forces – as distinct *and* equal members of the public realm.

Camus's and Arendt's aesthetic sensibility refuses to place narrative into the service of providing a new rational foundation for political action. Any such attempt, they warned, might stir the focus away from narrative judgement's political purpose: to retain attention on reconciling us with the worldliness of our political co-existence and helping us face the intricacies of political action. To explicate the political potential contained in their insights into the worldly character of narrative, the next section inquires into the experiential reality of our engagement with literary works. It contrasts Nussbaum's moral concern with ensuring a proper way of responding to others' suffering, with the existential thinkers' aesthetic emphasis on fostering worldly forms of recognition and kindling of a space for political action.

The World of the Narrative as the Space for Politics

Much like in Nussbaum, the existential thinkers' insight into the lived reality of our engagement with literary works begins with readers' acknowledgement that narrative is an act of world-disclosure, rather than knowledge or truth. It is an appeal to assume responsibility for what has been disclosed and take it up as a ground for our own acts of judgement. Camus's and Arendt's aesthetic loyalty to human plurality, however, holds that, long before we are able to retreat into the security of our private space to cultivate our own selves, we are constituted as "witnesses or even interlocutors" to different viewpoints on the world.[70] In turn, narrative-

inspired judgement is discouraged from any too simplistic a translation of literary discourse into moral lessons that could be applied onto real life. It proceeds by a careful examination of both how worldly relationships and structures have conditioned individuals' thoughts and actions, and how these conditions have been assumed in diverse ways by human freedoms.[71] Narrative voice thus incites us to recognize others in their worldly appearance: in their very distinctness, it is able to reveal a world that is shared in common.

This worldly orientation importantly speaks to the problematic of intersubjective recognition, which remains inadequately addressed in Nussbaum's literary ethics. While acknowledging that individuals' perspectives are historically shaped, her account directs the crux of desired recognition at the inner subjectivity of particular characters. In this respect, Nussbaum's ethics of reading betrays the abstract humanist proposition of a self-constituting consciousness, which only needs to shed its particular situational constraints to reach its full presence to itself. Because it focuses on individuals' humanity as an inner quality, it for instance obscures the ways in which a certain (oppressive) situation is constitutive of their very being and may fail to challenge the structures of social and political inequality. This makes Nussbaum's literary imagination vulnerable to the powerful postmodern criticism of the narrative ability to represent the irreducible difference of political life. For these critics, narrative's other-directed beautifying gaze ends up imposing on other people the supposedly universal values of the privileged. In contrast to its emancipatory aspirations, it risks reproducing the hierarchies of social power.[72]

From the existential thinkers' perspective, however, these troubling political implications of Nussbaum's position arise from its conception of the desired goal of mutual recognition. Nussbaum's inward-directed ethics of narrative remains underpinned by the concern with achieving proper, just recognition, mutual intelligibility and security. To argue with Markell, it commits a more fundamental, "ontological," form of misrecognition.[73] It envisions the goal

of mutual recognition between different subjectivities in terms of a self-contained substantiality or a predetermined end, lying outside of political relationships and structures in which they are inescapably enmeshed. This problem echoes Camus's and Arendt's wariness of attempts to penetrate to the inner core of the others' subjectivity and achieve perfect coincidence between human consciousnesses. Camus observed that such attempts proceed in accordance with the (Hegelian) dialectical conception of intersubjective recognition. While envisioned to end in a happy reconciliation of opposing sides, this conception entrenches the division between masters and slaves, and amounts to "blind combat," where final agreement ensues only at the expense of eliminating difference.[74] It was this desire to achieve complete mutual understanding between persons that Arendt warned against as an unpolitical form of human togetherness. Shorn of an in-between space of the world, she held, this tendency leads to a unity of perspectives that abstracts from the fact of human plurality and diminishes the sense of common worldly reality.[75] What Nussbaum's approach lacks, then, is an account of how narrative can incite the activity of judging particular experiences, situating them within the worldly environment, and disclosing grounds for solidarity across different groupings. Not only does it invite the objection of appropriating others' separate subjectivities, it also risks missing out on the intersubjective condition of political action and the attendant unpredictability of political life.[76]

These observations are illuminated in Nussbaum's insightful reading of Henry James's *Golden Bowl.* Published in 1904, the novel centres on the character of Maggie Verver, tracing her journey from childlike (moral) innocence to assuming the complexities of (married) life. For Nussbaum, the heroine's transformation embodies the relevance of literature to moral judgement as encapsulated in James's ideal of "being finely aware and richly responsible."[77] In the first part of the novel, Maggie's choices are guided by the aspiration to moral perfection, expressed through her harmonious relationship with her father: an aspiration to "never breaking

a rule, never hurting."[78] She purports to resolve any conflict of values by subordinating the meaning of any opposing claim to the sought-for wholeness of her life – as when she "solves" the conflict between the love for her husband and the duty to her father by simply "cutting back" the demands of marriage.[79] The troubling implications of Maggie's vision manifest Nussbaum's observation that a strict following of abstract moral ideals entails "extraordinary blindness" to people in their particularity and easily paves an enlightened way to "cruelty."[80] But the crucial insight of the novel Nussbaum traces to its second half, the moment when our protagonist finally discovers that humans are "cracked and flawed."[81] Learning of her husband's affair with her best friend and her father's wife, Charlotte, Maggie is initiated into the intricacy and tragedy of life. This new-found attentiveness leads her to find a new rule of action in "keen perception" and "vibrant sympathy" of response.[82] Yet, what is striking is that Maggie's realization amounts "to a new way of getting at perfection."[83] To save her marriage, Maggie "must damage Charlotte," resorting to "cunning" and "treachery."[84] However, she bears this sacrifice of her moral purity by sharpening her sensitivity to the pain she has caused and bearing the tragic burden of guilt. Her awareness of the complexities of human affairs involves a persistent denial of recognition to others, both Charlotte and her husband, as separate subjectivities that cannot be controlled or possessed – not "round," but "angular," always sticking out of edifying equations.[85] Far from "learning" from her "bad" actions, she assumes the "dirty" nature of the world and seeks to reclaim her own innocence by being "richly conscious" of her "sinning."[86] Nussbaum, to be sure, insists that this example does not so much invalidate the value of our striving for fine awareness, as point to how our application of this "loving" ideal to specific people or aspects of the world might tragically also nurture our blindness to others.[87] From Camus's and Arendt's worldly perspective, however, it is the very process of abstracting from human plurality and common reality underpinning Maggie's striving for transparent vision that also grounds the ease with which it might lend itself to

misleading political action.

Rather than aiming for identification with others' perspectives, representative aesthetic sensibility explores the immediate experience of suffering in its worldly significance. Importantly, such narrative-inspired judgement is not predicated upon any pre-given quality that may make us empathize more readily with certain individuals or groups. The presupposition that we are able to comprehend other standpoints rests on our recognizing in them the same unpredictable plays of freedom and world that constitute our own existence. A judgement on the oppressive character of a given situation is not founded upon a pre-conceived conception of a good life. It emerges from a consideration of how certain actions have obliterated or restrained the ability of certain individuals or groups to exert their freedom in practical projects in the world. For instance, we learn to recognize in the various undertakings of the oppressed, ranging from complicity to resistance, modes of lived experience in which individuals respond to their situation in the world. Further, worldly judgement helps us discern how individual acts of misrecognition are enframed by the broader field of institutional and structural factors. We thereby also gain insight into the intricate dynamics of complicity in unjust practices whose concerted effects lie beyond any individual's control. Finally, by luring us out of our self-contained selves, narrative drives us to reflect on our own situatedness within the web of worldly relationships. The political appeal of narratives, then, lies not in their ability to inspire empathetic identification with the victims *per se,* which, as Arendt observed, retains the division between those who suffer and their sympathizers.[88] It consists of a sense that what is at stake in a given oppressive situation is the fate of the common world and that any denial of freedom is a concern of the suffering and the non-suffering alike.

It is only after such exercises in world-travelling that we engage in what Booth calls "second-order valuings,"[89] a judgement on how the freedom of certain individuals or groups has been denied and what is required to reclaim their political status. Such narrative-inspired

judgement, however, does not constitute a wholesome moral community or agreement on an appropriate response. To evoke Beausoleil, it does not signify "the mastery of knowledge," but can better be envisioned as "the experience of meeting" – acknowledging the deeply situated nature of the encounter as well as the limits of understanding the concrete other.[90] It is only within this horizon that the inherent connectedness and interdependence as well as separateness and "dissymmetry"[91] between human consciousnesses comes fully to light. Yet, it is also only by revealing how a situation of oppression arose amidst our common world, that representative aesthetic sensibility appeals to the human capacities for political action in the present. Only in this way, for instance, are we able to recognize in others not eternal victims, but individuals whose humanity has been unjustly denied, and disclose grounds for solidarity with them. Similarly, only by considering particular commissions (or omissions) of "oppressors" as they echoed in the world, are we able to judge them not as inherently evil nor as passive objects of larger forces but apportion responsibility in human terms. Furthering an understanding of how experiences of injustice arose through worldly interaction between different individuals, representative narrative judgement allows former enemies to recognize each other as free members of the shared world, rather than "opposing abstractions" confronting each other in an eternal struggle.[92]

In this light, the operation of representative aesthetic judgement can be read as an attempt to reclaim "the spirit of the gift."[93] In the idea of the gift, on the one hand, is implied a presumption on the part of the giver of being able to adequately recognize what the other desires, and an appeal for this act of generosity to be acknowledged in gratitude. On the other hand, the very idea of an appeal presupposes the recognition of the freedom in the other and so an acknowledgement of the possibility that "the truth" of our gift will not be acknowledged in a return gesture.[94] Representative narrative judgement then does not eliminate the "dissymmetry" or the possibility of misrecognition between human consciousnesses. Rather

than complete reciprocity, its goal consists in the invigoration of communicability and sociability involved in the act of giving, receiving and giving in return. Constantly enriching the web of human relationships and illuminating the boundaries of the world, it is able to disclose a worldly space for a new beginning.

The political relevance of worldly engagement with literary works can be fruitfully illustrated by Camus's play *The Just.* Published in 1949, the play relates the lived experience of the Russian socialist revolutionaries of 1905, who, in the struggle against an unjust political and economic system, decide to assassinate the Grand Duke Sergei. Camus's aesthetic attentiveness to the ambiguity of political action and the attendant need for limits comes forth in the ruminations of the morally troubled assassin Ivan Kaliayev.[95] While Kaliayev is determined to throw the bomb at the Duke's carriage, he remains doubtful whether the fight against oppression justifies the killing of another human being and is willing to "pay" for his action by surrendering to the scaffold.[96] The promise of confronting the ambiguity of political action through a dialogical judging sensibility most fully emerges in the exchange between Kaliayev and the Grand Duchess. After the death of her husband, the Duchess visits Kaliayev in prison and offers forgiveness. Yet, her act of empathy reduces his assassination to a morally wrong act of murdering a human being of flesh and blood, a man "who used to love the peasants."[97] She appeals to Kaliayev to assume responsibility by repenting for the suffering he has caused and thereby regain the (Christian) ideals of goodness and innocence.[98] In response, Kaliayev insists that repentance would amount to a betrayal of the solidarity for the suffering people, and wishes to affirm the worldly significance of his act of resistance against the unjust system.[99] We can observe how the Duchess' attempt to reckon with the tragedy of political action rests on a certain despair, even resentment against the plurality and unpredictability of the world. Subsuming the particularity of the other under her own vision of moral community, she at the same time evades a reflection on her own situatedness in and responsibility for the

oppressive regime.[100] In his insistence on sacrificing his own life, in contrast, Kaliayev exposes the unjust conditions of political action that have "[forced him] into crime," but also refuses to justify violence, even in the service of a worthy ideal.[101] Even though the dialogue does not lead to agreement, the exchange of differently situated perspectives nevertheless brings to light the contours of a shared world. It stirs into motion the process of understanding the given oppressive situation, carefully scrutinizing whether and how it might have legitimated a resort to violent means, as well as how to conceive of forms of political engagement in the future.

Here worldly narrative-inspired judgement highlights the significance of Camus's notion of limits in relation to confronting the ambiguity of political action. While it holds that the meaning of a given situation cannot be imposed from above the human affairs, it also acknowledges that an assessment of resistance cannot be determined with reference to a pre-given end. What representative judging sensibility thereby challenges is the moral focus of Nussbaum's ethics of narrative, predominantly oriented to cultivating in the readers appropriate emotional responses. As manifested in the troubling implications of Maggie's striving for proper vision, this detour via the self short-circuits the process of reconciling with worldly reality and again finds itself facing the world through preconceived standards. Nurturing a new escape into the realm of moral innocence that refuses to be tainted by the world, it risks atrophying into a failure to imagine a viable course of action *or* into a dangerous instrumentalisation of others for given ends. The dialogical perspective of *The Just,* in contrast, retains attention to the worldly contradictions of political action, opening the space where they can be confronted through an exchange between a plurality of perspectives.[102] Thus, it also nurtures ongoing reflection on how our shared world should look like. Even if the play is a "testimony" to the justness of the resistance struggle, it nonetheless warns against elevating Kaliayev's sacrifice to a new rule of action that instantiates "the purity of the ideal," to be imitated in the future. As voiced by the perspective of his fellow revolutionary Dora,

Kaliayev's taking upon himself the world's suffering might just as easily solidify into a new dogma: "perhaps others will come and justify themselves by our example and not pay with their lives!"[103]

The existential thinkers' emphasis on worldly recognition can constantly invigorate a political space because, refusing to see others as substances that can be fully known, it dispenses with a view of them as objects "*for*" whom one should act.[104] Representative judgement shifts the focus to how to broaden the individuals' field of action, increase their potential to engage their freedom in practical projects in the world and have them taken up by others. For, by acknowledging different perspectives as rightful participants in the rebuilding and preservation of the common world, representative narrative engagement can pry open a space for their subjectivity to appear.[105] If others can recognize a trace of their own subjectivity in our judgement, they are more likely to engage with it, correct or dispute it. Their stories, in turn, will present us with new aspects of the common world, and incite us to a continuous effort in mutual understanding. Such worldly judgement does not seek to offset the inherently unpredictable nature of political action. It remains aware that individuals' perspectives may remain conflicting and that resistance to oppression might end up alienating others' freedom. Nevertheless, it renounces any blind justification of violent means in terms of an abstract end of liberation – attentive to the fact that political action cannot happen in "a vacuum"[106] but must take into account the emerging boundaries of the shared world.

Conclusion

The paper sought to contribute to current debates about the political significance of narrative imagination by drawing on Arendt's and Camus's aesthetic, representative judging sensibility.

Specifically, it displaced the prevalent tendency to probe literature for its moral-philosophical insights and instead delved into the experiential reality of our engagement with literary works. On this basis, it engaged a concern that animates the recent narrative turn, yet that remains insufficiently addressed by its primarily philosophical focus: how literary sensibility might help us confront the challenges of political judgement and action in our uncertain world shorn of absolute foundations. The article took as its starting point Nussbaum's apt recognition of the ability of literary works to account for the tragedy of human affairs, yet found her account of the ethics of reading as self-cultivation wanting politically. Focusing on the narrative capacity to cultivate in the reader appropriate emotional responses, Nussbaum's narrative ethics risks abstracting from the plurality of political affairs and falls short of reckoning with the ambiguity of political action. Camus's and Arendt's aesthetic judging sensibility, in contrast, emerged as explicitly political, constantly striving to evaluate the experiences of others in their intersubjective appearance and fostering a sense of the shared world between different individuals. Within this horizon, the value of narrative engagement does not lie in an eventual transcendence of subjective distortions and the reaching of a rational consensus on the correct course of action. Nor is the political import of narratives exhausted by adding to the discourse a competing perspective that would vie for victory with the existing ones. The existential thinkers' worldly focus disclosed the political significance of narrative in its ability to evoke alternative forms of community and open a political space where the spectre of suffering and tragedy can be dealt with, acknowledging the limits of the world and those of different others.

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Endnotes

[1] Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 293–94.

[2] Hämäläinen, 'Sophie, Antigone, Elizabeth - Rethinking Ethics by Reading Literature', 8–9, 12.

[3] In line with the existential-phenomenological orientation, the article is guided by a concern with narrativity as a way of understanding our experiential reality. It shies away from the "epistemological" focus grounding both the traditional, historiographical view of narrative as objective representation of outside reality, and the postmodern emphasis on instituting narrative text as a place of the endless deconstruction of all referentiality. The exploration of the political value of narrative voice also merits an acknowledgement of the important differences between various narrative forms and genres as they have developed in particular historical periods. I focus on the general features of narrative voice that Camus and Arendt have identified as politically fruitful, which may be manifested in varied ways through different forms and genres. The central concern, however, is not to engage in literary criticism of how a particular narrative is constructed as text, but how an engagement with narratives can kindle our capacity of political judgement. Following Nussbaum, my account focuses specifically on works of literature, but does not exclude non-literary aesthetic mediums. On different theoretical understandings of the role and purpose of narrative discourse with regards to real life and politics see Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality'; White, 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Thought'.

[4] Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility: Narrative and the Cultivation of Responsiveness*, 141–63; Stone-Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*; Thiele and Young, 'Practical Judgement, Narrative Experience and Wicked Problems'. I critically engage the respective contributions of these accounts elsewhere (see Author forthcoming).

[5] Nussbaum, 'Flawed Crystals'; Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 3–53.

[6] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 8, 3.

[7] Nussbaum, 156; Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*.

[8] Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind*, 121–22, 124; Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 24.

[9] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 23–53.

[10] Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind*, 121–22; Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 43.

[11] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 38–40, 44.

[12] Kearney, *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind*, 128.

[13] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 48; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 83; Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 48; Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 72, 252–72.

[14] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 87; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, xiv–xvi, 1-12.

[15] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 91–92.

[16] Nussbaum, 96–98, 34.

[17] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 31, 44.

[18] Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 92, 110.

[19] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 72–76; Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 162, 188–90.

[20] Vasterling, 'Cognitive Theory and Phenomenology', 84.

[21] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 166; Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, 66–67.

[22] Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, 7–8.

[23] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 46.

[24] Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, 65.

[25] Vasterling, 'Cognitive Theory and Phenomenology', 90–92; Wrighton, 'Reading Responsibly between Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel Levinas', 159–60, 164.

[26] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 48; Wrighton, 'Reading Responsibly between Martha Nussbaum and Emmanuel

Levinas', 159–61.

[27] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 142, 23, 27, 43, 17; Vasterling, 'Cognitive Theory and Phenomenology', 91.

[28] These political implications of Nussbaum's narrative ethics anticipate the author's later turn to a sustained engagement with and refinement of John Rawls's political liberalism, especially evident in her work on the political cultivation of emotion. While Nussbaum remains critical of the overly rationalistic elements of Rawls's theory, the focus of concern shifts from facing up to 'the fragility of goodness', towards exploring how the loving attentiveness to the particularities of human life characteristic of narratives can nurture the political culture of equal respect, encourage an overlapping consensus on fundamental principles and ensure the stability of liberal democracies. See Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, 1–24; Nussbaum, 'Rawls's Political Liberalism. A Reassessment', 19–23.

[29] The article builds on rich literature that has examined Camus's and Arendt's critical engagement with the tradition of existentialism, and discerned in their visions of political judgement and action a distinctly worldly sensibility. For illuminating portraits of Camus as political thinker of limits see Hayden, *Camus and the Challenge of Political Thought: Between Despair and Hope*. For accounts of the worldly character of Arendt's existential orientation see Hinchman and Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized: Arendt`s Debt to Jaspers'; Hinchman and Hinchman, 'In Heidegger`s Shadow: Hannah Arendt`s Phenomenological Humanism'; Biskowski, 'Practical Foundations for Political Judgement: Arendt on Action and World'. For an insightful reading of Camus's and Arendt's shared guiding orientation with a view to political engagement see Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*.

[30] Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 14, 307–27; Camus, *The Rebel*, 11–12; Camus, 'The Human Crisis'.

[31] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

[32] Camus, 28, 21, 49.

[33] Camus, 8.

[34] Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 58.

[35] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 65.

[36] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant*, 76, 13.

[37] Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, 41.

[38] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 140–44, 181–83.

[39] Arendt, 188–92, 226; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 150.

[40] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 216.

[41] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182; Arendt, *Lectures on Kant*, 66; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 131–35. In Ronald Beiner's influential interpretation, Arendt's turn to Kant denotes a shift in her understanding of political judgement from that of a political actor to that of a disengaged spectator. I depart from this interpretation and instead build on the scholarship that has examined how the perspectives of actor and spectator are intertwined in Arendt's account of political judgement and explored the political significance of Arendt's narrative imagination Hayden, 'Arendt and the Political Power of Judgement'; Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition*, 12, 45–5, 57–58, 107; Fine, 'Judgement and the Reification of the Faculties: A Reconstructive Reading of Arendt's Life of the Mind'; Herzog, 'Marginal Thinking or Communication'; Zerilli, '"We Feel Our Freedom": Imagination and Judgement in the Thought of Hannah Arendt'; Disch, 'More Truth Than Fact: Storytelling as Critical Understanding in the Writings of Hannah Arendt'.

[42] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 55–58; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 257.

[43] Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 205–6; Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 307–8; Benhabib, 'Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative', 167–96; Buckler, 'Coming out of Hiding', 618, 623.

[44] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 257; Kearney, *On Stories*, 132–33.

[45] Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 408. The existential orientation echoes the emergence of politics of recognition as a distinct approach to understanding politics. See Taylor, *Multiculturalism*; Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*.

[46] Hayden, 'The Human Right to Health and the Struggle for Recognition', 575–78.

[47] Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 90–96, 101–3.

[48] Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 268–69.

[49] Camus, *The Rebel*, 29–31, 72–75.

[50] Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 268, 261–62; Aronson, *Camus & Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It*, 56–60.

[51] Jeanson, 'To Tell You Everything', 174.

[52] Camus, *The Rebel*, 254–55.

[53] Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 266; Zaretsky, *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*, 86–87, 155–59.

[54] Camus, *The Rebel*, 27.

[55] Camus, *The Plague*, 232–37; Gatta, 'Suffering and the Making of Politics', 339–40, 346–51.

[56] Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 70; Camus, *Camus at Combat*, 251.

[57] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 208, 222.

[58] Arendt, 219.

[59] Arendt, 206–8, 199–200.

[60] Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 105, 109.

[61] Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 180–81.

[62] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 200.

[63] Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 176–85.

[64] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant*, 43; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 217, 237.

[65] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant*, 67–69.

[66] Arendt, 43; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 51.

[67] Arendt, *Lectures on Kant*, 70, 74; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 218.

[68] Zerilli, 'Value Pluralism and the Problem of Judgement: Farewell to Public Reason', 21–23.

[69] Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 78–80, 85.

[70] Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, 65.

[71] Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics*, 57–61.

[72] Black, *Fiction Across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in Late Twentieth-Century Novels*, 2–3, 24.

[73] Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 3–5.

[74] Camus, *The Rebel*, 130.

[75] Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 200.

[76] Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 3–5.

[77] Nussbaum, *Love`s Knowledge*, 135, 138, 148.

[78] Nussbaum, 126.

[79] Nussbaum, 127–29.

[80] Nussbaum, 132.

[81] Nussbaum, 133–34.

[82] Nussbaum, 132–34.

[83] Nussbaum, 134.

[84] Nussbaum, 134.

[85] Nussbaum, 135, 128–31.

[86] Nussbaum, 135.

[87] Nussbaum, 137–38.

[88] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 29–30.

[89] Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 270–71.

[90] Beausoleil, 'Mastery of Knowledge or Meeting of Subjects?', 16–18; Mihai, 'Epistemic Marginalisation and the Seductive Power of Art'.

[91] Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 154.

[92] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 50–51, 55; Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, 32.

[93] Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 236–37.

[94] Ricoeur, 225–30.

[95] Camus, *The Rebel*, 133–42.

[96] Camus, *Caligula*, 174–76.

[97] Camus, 214.

[98] Camus, 213–14.

[99] Camus, 215.

[100] Camus, 214–15.

[101] Camus, 214–15, 208–10, 219–20.

[102] Zaretsky, 'The Tragic Nostalgia of Albert Camus'; Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, 131.

[103] Camus, *Caligula*, 226, 220–22.

[104] Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 230.

[105] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*.

[106] Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 44.

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